The Lord Buddha and the Nagas

The Mahawansa says that about the sixth century B. C. there were Yakkas confined to the centre of this island, and the Nagas dominating the Western and Northern parts.

There have been various conjectures made as to the origin of the Nagas. Some have thought that they were serpent worshippers, *(Scythic Nagas - The History of India. Vol I, P 147, by Talboys Weeler).* Others have surmised that the name was derived from the fact that their head covering was in the shape of the hood of a hydra - headed cobra. The word NAGA in Sanskrit means 'the mountain dweller'. The Sanskrit words, NĀGĒ PARWATĒ BHAWAKH mean that the NĀGĀS are the mountain dwellers.

"The Nagas are very closely connected with the entire life of the Buddha. Prince Siddhartha was born in Lumbini in Nepal, and Lord Buddha had very close connections with these people. In fact prince Siddhartha's mother, Maya Devi was the daughter of Lumbini Devi, wife of Supra Buddha." *(The History of Ancient Aryan tribes in Sri Lanka, P. 63, CP iii by E. M. C. AMUNUGAMA)* This means Lumbini Devi was of Naga origin and directly related to Lord Buddha.

E. M. C. Amunugama further records in his book 'The history of Ancient Aryan tribes in Sri Lanka.' Ch iii. Page 76, that "while living at Sāvatthi, Buddha came to know of an impending war between the two Naga kings Culodara and Mahodara at Nagadeepa in Lanka, ……………………………. He came to help the Nagas at Nagadeepa probably because they, were related to him from his mother's side. *(As he was Lumbini Devi from Nepal where 'Serpas' or Naga worshippers lived.)"*

Lord Buddha preached to these two Naga kings Culodara and Mahodara on reconciliation. As a result of this preaching, eighty 'Kotis' of Nagas are said to have been converted to Buddhism.

In the first visit of the Buddha to Hela Diva, the Buddha met Mahasumana and Naga king Maniakkhika of Kelaniya who embraced Buddhism, by listening to his preachings on the dhamma.

It was said that Erakapatra who lived in the upper confluence of the river Ganges was the first Naga king who became a Buddhist. *(Sākyasimhā vadānaya, P 52, by Balangoda Ananda Maitreya thero)*

After attaining enlightenment Load Buddha spent seven weeks near the purlleus of the Bodhi tree. During the sixth week he was protected from heavy rain by a great Naga king Muchalinda. This king Muchalinda was a Naga ruler of a neighbouring kingdom in Nepal.

E. M. C. Amunugama in his book 'The history of Ancient Aryan tribes in Sri Lanka, chp, iii, P 64, 65, 66, 67 proves that Tapassu and Bhalluka, *(Dve - vācika - upāsakas)* were also Nagas.

Mudaliyar C. Rasanayagam says, that, "Among the Nagas the symbol of a Cobra was in common use as a favourite ornament. It formed the drop of an earring, the clasp of a necklace and a bracelet, the description of a lady's belt, the support of a lamp, the royal crest, and the emblems emblazoned on the royal standard and on the soldiers scabbard"

(The Ancient Jaffna. P 170 by Mudaliyar C. Rasanayagam)

In the same page he states. "A head dress resembling the hood of a cobra is even now worn by the novitiates for the Upasampada Ceremony of a fact which proves that the earliest Buddhist monks were recruited from among the Nagas."

Dr. Mirando Obeysekare, in his “The Traditional Flags of Ceylon” describes that the earliest Naga monarchs of Ceylon used Swastika and Cobra symbols as their flags.

The Nagas were a prominent non-Aryan race and their names are reserved in various parts of India and Ceylon.

In the second century A. D. the Nagas grew powerful enough to become sovering of all Ceylon, according to Mahawassa.

It seems clear, that a Naga Kingdom existed in Ceylon continuously from sixth century B. C. to the middle of the third century A. D.

Maha Naga, the brother of king Devanam Piyatissa was the first in the line of Ceylon kings, who bore the name of NAGA.

The NAGA dynasty which begins from Maha Naga, from whom the NAGA strain in the blood of Ceylon kings began to appear and continued to grow from time to time, until the dynasty became altogether Nagas.

“History records several Naga kings of Lanka. They are Ala Naga. Uparaja Maha Naga brother of king Dewanam Piyatissa (240 - 207 BC), Khallata Naga (50 - 44 BC), Cora Naga (3 BC - 9 AD), Maha Datika Maha Naga (66 - 78 AD), Illa Naga (95 - 101 AD), Mahallaka Naga (193 - 199 AD), Khujja Naga (241 - 243 AD), Kunca Naga (234 - 244 AD), Siri Naga I (244 - 263 AD), Abhaya Naga (285 - 293 AD), Siri Naga II”
(P. N. Cumaranatunga, Indo - Lanka, Ethnic Affinities Book I, Chp 3, P 50)

“There are numerous references to Nagas in ancient Lankan inscriptions given in ‘Inscriptions of Ceylon, Volume I, Early Brahmi Inscriptions by S. Paranawitane 1970.”

“Some of the earliest inscriptions so far discovered indicate the presence of Naga royal personages and nobility in Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Ampara, Kurunegala, Hambantota, Monaragala, Badulla, Rathnapura, Kegalle, Matale and Puttalam Districts”
(P. N. Cumaranatunga, Indo - Lanka Ethinic Affinities, Book I, PP 49,50)

During the period of 200 AD the Nagas of central India also became very powerful and one of their royal families was called CHUTU NAGAS. They intermarried among them and eventually succeeded to the throne of the CHUTUS of the Naga race. *(History of the Decan, by professor, G. Jouveau Dubreuil)*

Hugh Neville’s view was that the NAGAN SUPREMACY in North India, Ceylon and Travancore was between 2200 to 1600 BC.
(Oriental Studies, by Hugh Neville)

Ramayanaya, which contains the earliest references to Ceylon, mentions and describes the Naga capital, in addition to other famous NAGA towns, as one of the most attractive and beautiful places which Hanuma saw when he was in Rawana’s Lanka, in search of his Master’s wife, Princess Sita.

In the Mahabharata epic, the Nagas are frequently mentioned as living in various parts of India and Ceylon in a highly civilized state under their own kings and had well established laws.

About the Lion Flag or the Royal Emblem, P. N. Cumaranatunga states that “the kings of Lanka to whatever race they belonged adopted the original royal emblem of the Nagas as their royal standard, which was the Lion Flag, until Lanka was ceded to the British Crown in 1815 and this had been the practice of the Lankan monarchs.”
(P. N. Cumaranatunga, Indo - Lanka Ethnic Affinities, Book I, P 41)

Mudliar C. Rasanayagam in his Anceint Jaffna, on page 43, also states "This standard displaying a lion appears therefore, to have been used by the Naga kings of North Ceylon long before the advent of Vijaya. "On the contrary the standard of the lion which appears to have been the emblem of the Nagas of North Ceylon continued to be the flag of the Ceylon kings till the island was ceded to the British in 1815 A. D."

"A Denis, N. Fernando, Fellow of the National Academy of sciences writing on "Taprabane as Ptolemy saw" in the Sunday Island, 18th November 1984, states that Ruhuna and Nagadeepa were synonymous and Ruhuna was always ruled by the Naga kings starting with Mahanaga"

"One of the ports marked by Ptolemy in the South was Dagana or Devundara a place inhabited by the Nagas in Ancient Lanka………"
(P. N. Cumaranatunga, Indo - Lanka Ethnic Affinities, Book I, page 43)

Mudaliar Rasanayagam says that king Mutasiva's queen was a Naga Princess. Prince Mahanaga who fled the kingdom through fear of court retaliation and settled down in Magama was their son. The Nagas of Magama accepted Maha Naga as one of their kinsmen.
(P. N. Cumaranatunga, Indo - Lanka Ethnic Affinities, Book I, page 44)

In the ancients times the Naga strongholds were Naimana or Navimana (Naga Vimana), Nagavila, Nagakovila, Nadugala, Nayimbala, Nakulugamuwa, Naotunna and Nakanda in Matara.

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